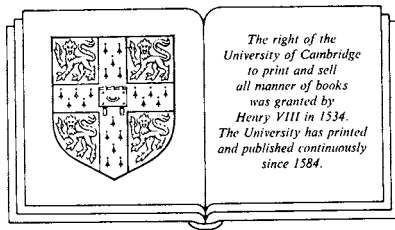


*Yankee merchants and the
making of the urban West
The rise and fall
of antebellum St. Louis*

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Contents

Acknowledgments	vi
1 Introduction	1
2 "These Yankee notions will not suit Missouri"	13
3 Savagedom, destiny, and the isothermal zodiac	43
4 Yankee newcomers and prosperity	61
5 "The offspring of the East"	91
6 A border city in an age of sectionalism	110
7 Rebirth	145
Conclusion	175
Notes	178
Bibliography	250
Index	269

1 *Introduction*

This study examines the forces that shaped the growth of western cities in antebellum America. The focus of the book is the rise and fall of St. Louis, the first major urban center of the trans-Mississippi region. During the mid-1840s St. Louis blossomed into a commercial giant and dominated the economic development of the Far West. Capital and migrants poured into the city, and it became a boomtown. Denied economic sustenance, rival trading centers withered and faded into obscurity. Cahokia, Kaskaskia, and Alton, for example, remained insignificant towns lost in a region controlled by the leading city of the Mississippi valley.¹ Moreover, the growth of St. Louis shaped the economic development of the West, determining the flow of eastern capital and migrants to the area, the vitality of its trading partners, and the role of the region in the national economy.

The sources of St. Louis's vitality, however, have remained unknown. Scholars have not explained why St. Louis outdistanced its rivals and became the dominant city in the West. Nor have historians explained why the city failed to maintain its position as the commercial capital of the West.² During the late 1850s Chicago supplanted St. Louis and became the leading city of the region, abruptly transforming the economic development of the region. This study analyzes the forces that sparked the rise and triggered the fall of St. Louis.³ It also considers the ways in which those forces spurred the development of Chicago, the greatest boomtown in nineteenth-century America.

In the early competition for regional dominance, St. Louis was an unlikely winner. Cities grew at their fastest pace in American history during the antebellum period, and St. Louis was among the fastest-growing major cities for much of the era. Although contemporaries insisted that St. Louis had been "blessed" by nature, formidable obstacles disrupted the city's development.⁴ Most nineteenth-century boomtowns experienced long periods of uninterrupted growth. For St. Louis, however, short bursts of economic development punctuated prolonged stagnation and frequent crises.

If nature "elevated" the city to greatness, it also contributed to the bumpy and uneven ascent of the city. To be sure, geography stimulated the growth of St. Louis. Located at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and just north of the junction of the Ohio and the Mississippi, the city seemed to be ideally situated for commerce. St. Louis became the jumping-off point for settlers migrating to the frontier and the principal trading post on the river system of the Far West.⁵ But this location created problems as well.

Nature discouraged some migrants from settling in St. Louis and insured that others would never leave the city. The "miasmic" winds of the Mississippi valley, residents and visitors believed, descended upon the city and introduced disease and plague to St. Louis. Each summer these breezes blanketed the area and brought yellow fever, which killed large numbers of residents, particularly children. According to one editor, July and August were "very unfavorable to children."⁶ Cholera epidemics, which struck the city in 1832 and 1849, also claimed large numbers of residents and blackened the city's reputation. The 1849 epidemic, for example, killed over 10 percent of the population of St. Louis, and an additional third of the city's inhabitants fled into the countryside, literally hoping to outrun the disease.⁷ Smallpox, intermittent fever, and malaria decimated the local population as well.⁸ One experienced traveler likened summer in St. Louis to the "Black Hole of Calcutta."⁹ Charles Dickens, however, tried to be restrained in his description of the city. St. Louis, he noted in 1842, was as healthy as any territory with "vast tracts of undrained swampy land around it."¹⁰

Other obstacles flowed directly from the natural blessings of the great river of the West. Changes in the channel of the Mississippi River, for example, threatened to make St. Louis a landlocked river town. An enormous sandbar, called Bloody Island, emerged near the wharf area and redirected the flow of the river away from St. Louis and toward the Illinois shore.¹¹ On other occasions, the problem was just the opposite, and the Mississippi flowed too close to the city, flooding the levee and submerging the local business district in the muddy water of the river.¹² The transportation system spawned by the Mississippi also posed certain dangers. In 1849, at the height of the cholera epidemic, a fire spread from the steamer *White Cloud* to the levee area and consumed much of the business district of the city.¹³ The editor of the *Missouri Republican*, perhaps with a touch of irony, boasted that "were it not for the broken walls, choked up streets, and smoldering ruins, no one would ever discover that a fire, and particularly one of such magnitude, had taken place in our midst."¹⁴ The natural advantages of the city brought disease, flood, and fire.

Nor was the man-made atmosphere well suited to city building. In an age in which aggressive legislators used the legal system to spur urban growth, the state assembly of Missouri repeatedly dedicated itself to creating a legal and institutional environment that would prevent the growth of St. Louis.¹⁵ Missouri legislators rejected the banking and corporate reforms that stimulated economic development in cities such as New York and Boston; St. Louis had no commercial banking facilities until the late 1850s.¹⁶

Internal improvements, another well-established source of urban prosperity, also contributed little to the city's growth. In the era of the steamboat and the canal, the city was served by no canals. Moreover, St. Louis residents contracted "railroad fever" during the antebellum period and invested more in railroad development than their Chicago counterparts, though local construction seemed doomed to failure.¹⁷ Institutional and financial problems slowed progress. Bad luck plagued Missouri railroad builders as well. For example, one of the first major achievements for the city's railroad men, the much-publicized opening of a section of the Pacific Railroad, ended in tragedy when the train, filled with local dignitaries and politicians, crashed through a new wooden bridge and plunged into the river below. Thirty-one passengers died in the wreck, including the chief construction engineer of the railroad.¹⁸ Although boosters tried desperately to manufacture growth, they enjoyed little success.

The economy of St. Louis was unusually fragile as well. Business cycles repeatedly and profoundly disrupted the local marketplace. The financial downturns that slowed the growth of other cities nearly arrested the growth of St. Louis. For example, the Panic of 1819 interrupted the city's development for almost a decade, and the effects of the depressions of the late 1830s and the late 1850s lingered almost as long.¹⁹ Every national or regional disruption undermined the city's economic vitality.

Yet St. Louis mushroomed. In spite of disease, sandbars, a hostile legal and institutional atmosphere, the absence of banks, canals, and railroads, and a frail economy, the city blossomed and dominated its rivals. John Kasson, who later moved to Iowa and served in Congress, suggested that disasters "spent themselves vainly against the prosperity of this city, like waves at the foot of an eternal sea-rock."²⁰ At midcentury, St. Louis was the eighth largest city in the nation, and its trading hinterland stretched from the upper Midwest deep into the lower Mississippi valley and from the lower Ohio valley far into the western frontier.

Moreover, in antebellum America growth generated growth. As St. Louis became a cog in the national economy, eastern businessmen

relocated to the city to take advantage of its new role in the commerce of the West. Thus, St. Louis emerged as the last major supply center before the frontier, and westward settlers increasingly chose to buy their supplies in the city. Commercial profits soared; more businessmen migrated to the city; and growing numbers of settlers opted to purchase provisions in the bustling marketplace. Investment and migration patterns became well established; the advantages enjoyed by a leading city, geographers have noted, are cumulative and self-perpetuating.²¹ Investors and migrants chose St. Louis during the 1840s because it was the major urban center of the region, and St. Louis remained the major urban center of the region because investors and migrants chose it over smaller cities in the Mississippi valley.

If St. Louis was an unlikely winner in the battle for regional supremacy during the 1840s, the city was also an unlikely loser in the same contest a decade later. At the height of its prosperity, after having weathered epidemics, riots, fires, floods, railroad disasters, and economic downturns, St. Louis collapsed.²² Although settlers and businessmen preferred to invest in established markets, migrants and capitalists abandoned St. Louis during the late 1850s and directed their attention and their resources to a smaller and less-developed city – Chicago. Despite its considerable headstart over Chicago, its celebrated advantages, and the inertia generated by regional supremacy, St. Louis lost its leading position. Only one city could dominate the West, and at the start of Chicago's challenge, St. Louis's advantages seemed insurmountable.²³ But by 1860 Chicago had supplanted St. Louis. Although the Missouri city did not wither like its old rival Alton, St. Louis was a declining city with a shrinking hinterland by the beginning of the Civil War.

Neither contemporary observers nor modern analysts have explained the rise – or the fall – of the first major urban center of the antebellum West. Furthermore, historians have seldom explained the process through which a city dominated its region or the forces that shaped the rise and fall of western boomtowns.²⁴ Instead, writers and scholars have usually offered deterministic or teleological answers.

Many antebellum observers believed that nature ordained the growth of cities. The “natural laws of commerce,” they argued, elevated St. Louis to greatness.²⁵ According to popular economic theory, commerce followed meridians.²⁶ Cities situated on rivers running from north to south would become trading centers where the products of northern regions would be exchanged for those of southern regions. St. Louis's location, at the break-point of the major river in the West, insured that the city would dominate its rivals. Amateur geographers and travel writers also predicted that the Mississippi

valley would form the heart of the national economy. They noted that the "Father of the Waters" divided the United States into two roughly equal parts. Because natural currents of commerce focused the interior trade at St. Louis, the city was destined, they said, to become the largest trading center of the great valley and the next major emporium of the western world. According to Robert Sears, the author of *A Pictorial Description of the United States*, "nature never formed a plateau of ground more admirably adapted to the site of an immense city."²⁷

Some contemporary thinkers formulated complex theories to predict urban growth. William Gilpin, for example, expanded and embellished the ideas of Alexander von Humboldt to explain the rise of cities and of civilizations. Gilpin reported that the "Isothermal Zodiac," the great natural band of human progress, determined the course of urban development. St. Louis, he noted, lay along the "Axis of Intensity" and therefore in the path of the natural current of civilization. Thus, it would ultimately assume great prominence, as had Rome, London, and New York before it.²⁸

Like many urban theorists of the period, Gilpin developed ideas that reflected the imagination of a visionary and the heart of a land speculator. He announced the destiny of St. Louis, for example, shortly after settling in Missouri. Gilpin also purchased a parcel of land near Independence and predicted greatness for the future metropolis called "Gilpintown." When none of these sites fulfilled his expectations (and his political career stalled), Gilpin left Missouri. After moving to Colorado, reworking his calculations, and investing in a number of business ventures in the state, William Gilpin concluded that the true heir apparent to Athens, Rome, and London, the city situated at the center of the swath covered by the Isothermal Zodiac, was Denver.²⁹ Other theorists lacked Gilpin's creativity, though they shared his promotional zeal.³⁰

More conventional writers substituted description for theory. The ascent of the leading city of the Far West always seemed to have been inevitable. Visitors to St. Louis during the height of its prosperity concluded that the Missouri city had been destined to dominate the West.³¹ Nature had blessed it, they blithely explained, and no rival would challenge its supremacy. The city's advantages were incomparable; its economic empire was unparalleled; and its future was glorious. A decade later, however, Chicago dominated the commerce of the West, and travel writers and financial reporters argued that nature had chosen the Illinois city.³² Its growth, they agreed, had been inevitable. In short, most observers used the conditions of the present to gauge the course of destiny. Successful cities must have been blessed by nature. Their growth had been inevitable.

Modern scholars sometimes rely on similar arguments. The ascent of Chicago, for example, is often assumed to have been inevitable. Some writers have traced the rise and fall of regional entrepôts to shifts in trade currents. Commercial traffic ran from north to south during the Jacksonian era, and thus, according to this theory, St. Louis enjoyed prosperity during the age of the steamboat. But the course of trade changed during the 1850s, and, as a consequence, Chicago became the leading city of the region. Shifting currents of commerce, therefore, triggered the rise and fall of St. Louis and the inevitable ascent of Chicago.³³

Other scholars link the development of the leading cities of the Far West to railroad construction. Chicago, according to this view, was destined to become a railroad capital, and, therefore, the city ultimately dominated its rivals. One leading historian of Chicago noted that the city "found itself" at the center of an enormous railroad network.³⁴ The process was somehow inevitable; natural and undeniable forces directed railroad capital to Chicago and thus fueled the city's growth.³⁵ This argument, a reviewer observed, assumes that "railroad construction is an independent variable."³⁶

But railroad construction was not an independent variable, and the rise of Chicago, like the fall of St. Louis, was no more inevitable than any other historical development. Destiny did not dictate the course of railroad construction; rather, builders and investors determined the course of railroad construction. Too often, historians have concluded that Chicago was destined to become the heart of the western rail system. As a result, scholars have seldom asked why railroad builders and investors chose to build lines centered in Chicago.

Until the early 1850s railroad financiers did not believe that Chicago constituted the obvious western rail hub. Many railroad investors during this period considered St. Louis a more promising site for railroad construction.³⁷ They hoped to build commercial empires around well-established cities that offered both rail and river transportation. Some influential commercial writers and promoters also argued that overland transportation would complement river traffic.³⁸ William Gilpin predicted that rail lines would be constructed along the "Axis of Intensity," enhancing the supremacy of river towns.³⁹ In the early 1850s railroad builders agreed that the new mode of transportation should serve older forms of transportation. For example, numerous roads served Cairo, Illinois, the town located at the confluence of the Ohio and the Mississippi rivers, and St. Louis lines attracted considerable interest from early investors.⁴⁰ Moreover, many contemporaries believed that St. Louis was likely to become the heart of the nation's rail system.⁴¹ Modern scholars have also noted

that nineteenth-century railroads most often reinforced the initial advantages enjoyed by existing commercial centers. "New transportation systems," according to Diane Lindstrom and John Sharpless, tended to "recapitulate the old," and construction supported and enhanced established trading patterns more often than it revolutionized economic development.⁴²

Thus, the development of Chicago's railroad network was far from inevitable. Instead, it was one part of a larger change in migration and investment patterns during the 1850s. Financing ventures that centered in Chicago, a small, underdeveloped city until the 1850s, represented a new strategy for eastern capitalists and reflected a sharp break in economic thinking.⁴³ Powerful political and economic forces encouraged investors to shift their entrepreneurial efforts away from St. Louis and toward Chicago businesses. The pressures and processes that generated this shift accelerated the ascent of Chicago. Eastern investment strategies, acting in combination with locational forces, determined the course of railroad construction; the decisions of railroad builders were an effect – not a cause – of larger changes in the development of the urban West.

Some historians have traced Chicago's railroad network and its supremacy to the energy of local boosters.⁴⁴ They have argued that the aggressive promoters of Chicago enabled that city to defeat St. Louis and to control the commerce of the West. This view, most forcefully articulated by Wyatt Winton Belcher in 1947, holds that St. Louis boosters remained committed to the steamboat in the age of the railroad. Such a decision, Belcher insisted, reflected the southern backgrounds of local leaders and the "innate conservatism" that their roots generated.⁴⁵ According to Belcher's thesis, the complacent and shortsighted boosters of St. Louis doomed their city to defeat, while the "more astute business leadership" of Chicago, possessing knowledge that eluded the bumbling merchants of Missouri, embraced transportation improvements and led their city to victory and to regional supremacy.⁴⁶ Belcher's argument has been widely accepted.⁴⁷

This interpretation, however, is flawed. St. Louis boosters did not reject the railroad in favor of the steamboat, and they were neither complacent nor blind to the benefits of overland transportation. Even before midcentury, for example, St. Louis editors concluded that the railroad "would be of incaluable [*sic*] advantage to the mercantile interest of our city."⁴⁸ During the height of the competition between the cities, St. Louis residents embraced the railroad as energetically as did their Chicago counterparts.⁴⁹ Again and again, local leaders and politicians insisted that the city "must have Railroads."⁵⁰ By some measures, St. Louis boosters made greater efforts to build railroads

than did Chicago leaders. Merchants in the Missouri city pledged their own capital to hasten construction, and residents taxed themselves to support local railroads, a measure that Chicago residents avoided.⁵¹ In short, St. Louis railroads did not lag behind Chicago lines for want of local support or because the city's leaders lacked foresight.

Belcher's thesis assumes that boosterism, like railroad construction, was an independent variable. He noted that during the late 1850s and the 1860s St. Louis boosters often rejected the aggressive growth schemes that enjoyed immense popularity in Chicago. The business leaders of St. Louis, Belcher concluded, seemed overly cautious and even ambivalent about their war with Chicago. But, as Don Doyle demonstrated in his study of Jacksonville, Illinois, the tone of boosterism is often more an effect than a cause of urban development.⁵² Doyle explained that Jacksonville leaders redefined their aspirations when it became apparent that the town would never become the "Athens of the West." Boosters then embraced values that reflected local conditions and attempted to make a virtue out of necessity by celebrating the advantages of small-town life.⁵³ Doyle discovered that local leaders tried to project these new goals backward in time, insisting that they had always wanted Jacksonville to be a quiet, harmonious, small town.⁵⁴ Similarly, after Chicago's ascendance became undeniable, St. Louis boosters seemed conservative and complacent. They denigrated the promotional efforts of Chicago merchants and questioned the moral content of city dwellers who cherished only economic development.⁵⁵ A decade earlier, when the battle for regional supremacy was undecided, St. Louis boosters had espoused very different goals for themselves and very different aspirations for their city.⁵⁶

Both the deterministic explanation and the booster thesis argued by Belcher obscure the process through which St. Louis – and then Chicago – blossomed. These analyses often assume that internal forces fueled the growth of major western cities. Moreover, scholars who have linked urban development in the region to the infusion of eastern capital have emphasized local promotional efforts rather than the eastern response to these efforts, the influence of outside investors, or the role that such investment played in the growth of western cities. By concentrating on local factors and internal sources of growth, these historians divorce urban development from the broader social, political, and economic currents of antebellum America. As a result, they overlook the larger processes and pressures that affected the growth of cities in the Far West during this period.⁵⁷

External forces shaped the rise and fall of western cities. Young,

growing trading posts relied on outside sources of sustenance.⁵⁸ The demographic development of western boomtowns, for example, depended on long-distance migration; western cities grew by attracting outsiders.⁵⁹ Similarly, newcomers established institutions and marshaled their growth in undeveloped trading centers such as St. Louis. They influenced the character of local associations and the goals of local clubs and charitable organizations. Even the legal system had external roots. For example, in 1821, when Missouri joined the Union, a new legal system was born. Newcomers to the state brought strong ideas about the role of government, and they translated their convictions into law; the state constitution as well as the legislation enacted by the new assembly reflected the migration routes that peopled Missouri.⁶⁰ The ideological traditions and the legal conventions of older states shaped the character of the legal system of Missouri and its principal city.

The economic building blocks of urban growth flowed principally from external sources as well. Unlike older, well-established eastern cities, for which growth often emanated from subregional sources, frontier trading centers lacked capital markets, credit networks, and financial institutions.⁶¹ Outside investors and newcomers supplied these resources and stimulated commercial development.⁶² Moreover, for western boomtowns, venture capital flowed not from local or hinterland sources but from the cities along the Atlantic seaboard, and without the financial nourishment provided by distant entrepreneurs, frontier towns withered and died. With such eastern assistance, they could flourish.⁶³ Although regional and subregional conditions influenced this process, outsiders directed the rise and fall of transmontane trading centers.

Eastern interest in western cities such as St. Louis often began as a part of the ideological debates that raged in the older states. Many mid-nineteenth-century easterners, particularly members of the urban middle class, believed that western society was unmolded. Just as the maturation of St. Louis or Chicago could be shaped, the development of the Far West could be tailored.⁶⁴ A few Americans argued that the region needed to be reclaimed, either from Germans or from Catholics.⁶⁵ Others insisted that the savagery and the barbarism of the frontier needed to be conquered.⁶⁶ In addition, some Americans believed that the West held the future of America. The trans-Mississippi region, they suggested, represented the destiny of the nation. In the Far West the American character could be "regenerated" or perfected, and the nation's mission could be realized.⁶⁷ According to the historian Rush Welter, "the West served as a means of dramatizing fundamental conservative convictions."⁶⁸ Thus,

prominent ministers announced their "claims" on the region, and migrants crossed the great river in order to remake the West in the image of a rarefied East.⁶⁹ "The effect," Welter argued, "was to define the West in the light of eastern needs; to shape its image according to eastern concerns."⁷⁰ For both ideological and logistical reasons, the major cities of the West figured prominently in plans to improve the nation by colonizing the frontier.

While thinkers such as Lyman Beecher and Edward Everett viewed the Far West in ideological terms, more practical-minded writers often subscribed to similar theories. Molding the development of the West could not only buttress the political institutions of the older states but also promise to sustain the economic and social development of established areas. If properly nurtured, the Far West, through its leading trading centers, could become an important outpost or colony, insuring the economic well-being of the older states. Markets would expand; profits would soar; upward mobility would continue; individual economic and political independence would be protected; and the "destiny" of the nation would be assured.

If relatively few migrants or investors viewed the region in such grandiose terms, many settlers and capitalists measured the attractions of the West in terms of the needs of the East.⁷¹ Merchants, for example, poured capital into trans-Mississippi commercial ventures to serve the needs of their eastern businesses. Similarly, many Atlantic coast manufacturers established western outlets when factory production exceeded eastern demand. These New Yorkers and New Englanders – termed "Yankees" by St. Louis observers – directed surplus goods, extra capital, and ambitious clerks to the western city that seemed most responsive to their needs.⁷² As a result, the perceptions and the interests of the residents of older states shaped the development of the leading cities of the Far West. Moreover, the forces that changed those perceptions transformed the urban West.

The rise and fall of St. Louis and the city's rivalry with Chicago, however, also occurred in an age of sectional expansion. Like other national issues, the debate over the future of slavery influenced the currents that fueled the growth of western cities. Just as the Panic of 1837 and the collapse of the China trade affected the flow of settlers and capital to the urban West, the tensions between the North and the South altered the development of young cities. But because sectionalism unleashed such powerful passions, its effects proved to be particularly dramatic; the sectional crisis abruptly transformed the urban West. In political and economic terms, Northerners and Southerners battled to control the cities of the region in order to protect their own institutions. Historians have long recognized that the

sectional crisis influenced perceptions of the West and that the contest over the future of slavery transcended the bounds of formal politics. Few scholars, however, have considered the ways in which this controversy reshaped the development of western cities such as St. Louis and Chicago.⁷³

The leading cities of the Far West assumed a special role in discussions of sectional expansion. Some contemporary observers believed that the principal trading centers of the region represented potential beachheads in the crusade to determine the character of the new western territories. Much as settlers during the 1840s had viewed frontier cities as jumping-off points for the wilderness, ideologues during the 1850s considered the cities of the Far West to be possible staging points for efforts to spread sectional culture.⁷⁴

These assumptions proved to be both prescriptive and proscriptive. Radicals tried to control the political climate of western trading centers in order to make them suitable colonies or outposts for the migrants and for the institutions of a particular section.⁷⁵ The perception that a city had been conquered by the enemy, however, transformed the relationship between a section and its lost outpost. Extremists urged their followers to shun the city, and migrants avoided it as well, fearing a hostile reception from local residents.⁷⁶

This debate also colored discussions of the economic attractions of the leading cities of the Far West. Many financial writers insisted that the economic systems of the North and the South were incompatible. Slavery, according to Northern observers, undermined the free-labor system.⁷⁷ The economic system of the North, commercial writers in the South warned, endangered the slave economy. As a consequence, during the 1850s northern entrepreneurs who looked to western markets in order to expand their businesses avoided trading centers identified with the South.⁷⁸ Their counterparts to the south demonstrated similar caution, reflecting economic considerations rather than political passions.⁷⁹ Thus, at the same time that the North and the South were competing to define the character of western cities, perceptions of this struggle determined the flow of people and resources to the major trading centers of the region.

In the West, where cities relied on external sources to sustain growth, sectionalism represented the ultimate external force. During the 1850s – the decisive period in the development of St. Louis – legal developments, migration decisions, investment strategies, and railroad construction plans were formulated within the context of the crisis between the North and the South. As a result, the debate over the future of slavery profoundly altered the development of St. Louis and that of its principal rival.

In sum, national and regional forces fueled the rise and triggered the fall of the first major city west of the Mississippi River. Short-sighted local business leaders did not stunt the development of St. Louis, and farsighted boosters did not ignite the growth of Chicago. Nor was either process inevitable. Rather, sectionalism, financial crises, and cultural movements shaped the growth of western cities and the outcome of the battle between St. Louis and Chicago.